

THE SUN

San Bernardino County's Newspaper

Monday, April 16, 2007

Programs put homeless in apartments, not shelters

By Stephen Ohlemacher
The Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — Andrew Adams hated one soup kitchen because he believed the workers deprived him of food. He stopped staying at a homeless shelter because he was convinced the people who ran it were plotting to evict him.

So Adams lived on the street, sleeping in out-of-the-way places, trying to avoid the people who, in his mind, were out to get him.

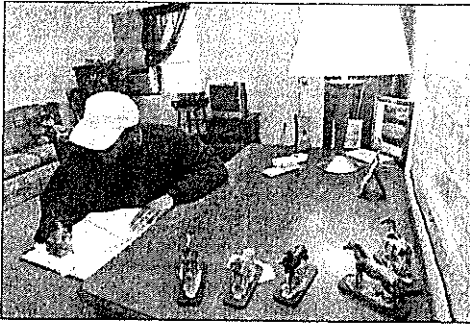
"Anywhere I walked, I could sleep," Adams said in an interview. "Anywhere hidden or discreet, where people wouldn't notice me when they walked by."

Adams, 41, was homeless for much of the past 20 years. Then, last fall, he was pulled from the street by a program that places mentally ill homeless people in apartments and provides them with services to help them live on their own.

Norfolk's program is part of a national effort to end chronic homelessness by giving people permanent housing, in apartments, rather than offering temporary beds in shelters.

The effort targets the hardest cases: the people who muller on street corners, sleep in doorways and rummage through garbage cans. Most are addicts, mentally ill or physically disabled. Many have resisted efforts to help them, some for decades.

In a few cities, the results have proved remarkable. But it



The Associated Press

Andrew Adams takes some time to write in his apartment in Norfolk, Va., last month. Adams moved into his apartment last fall as part of Norfolk's Housing First initiative, a program that puts homeless into existing housing and then tries to address their mental health or substance abuse issues.

has not come easy for communities as they try to navigate the maze of funding sources needed for such programs.

"We had spent 20 years managing the crisis," said Philip Mangano, who coordinates homeless programs for the federal government. "We thought a blanket and a bowl of soup was the best we could do for people. ... Now, we intend to end this disgrace."

The U.S. had three-quarters of a million homeless people according to a national count in January 2005 — the government's only national estimate. Nearly half of the homeless slept outside; the rest were in shelters or transitional beds.

Some cities have counted

homeless people for years. In the past few years, several have reported significant declines in the number of people sleeping on the street.

Among the cities that have seen their street population drop by one-third or more are St. Louis; San Francisco; Portland, Ore.; Nashua, N.H.; and Quincy, Mass. In Philadelphia, the number dropped by one-quarter.

In New York City, there was a 35 percent decrease in Manhattan, but increases in the city's other boroughs.

Norfolk, Virginia's second-largest city, cut the number of people sleeping on the street by almost half in a single year.

Mangano has worked with

about 300 communities to develop 10-year plans to end homelessness.

The plans vary by city, though all emphasize moving homeless people into housing rather than shelters. In many programs, tenants can stay indefinitely as long as they follow a few rules and are not disruptive to their neighbors.

They must regularly allow counselors into their apartments. In some programs, tenants are required to be sober or to take medications for mental illness; in others, they are merely encouraged to do so.

Most programs rent private apartments, though some cities have bought buildings. Rent is usually 30 percent of a tenant's income, if the tenant can work or qualify for government benefits. The cost is often subsidized by federal low-income housing programs.

In 1999, Congress began mandating that about one-third of federal homeless grants go to permanent housing programs. The Housing and Urban Development Department offers financial incentives to communities that emphasize housing instead of shelters.

As a result, the number of beds in permanent housing units devoted to homeless people jumped by 83 percent, to nearly 209,000, from 1996 to 2005, HUD says. During the same period, the number of emergency shelter beds shrank by more than one-third, to about 218,000.

"The shelter is there to catch you on a freezing cold night or

even on a warm night when you need a roof over your head," said Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless in New York City. "But permanent supportive housing is the answer."

Advocates for the homeless say housing programs are cost effective because they reduce emergency room, police and jail costs associated with people who live on the street.

New York City uses 20,000 apartments to house formerly homeless people. A University of Pennsylvania professor analyzed the city's program for people with severe mental illness and concluded that savings in emergency services nearly offset spending on housing and counseling.

But there is no single source of money to pay for apartments, case managers and mental health and substance abuse counseling. That leaves cities to cobble together federal, state and local money for housing and services, as well as private donations for furniture and clothes.

Norfolk's experience illustrates the complexity.

The city works with about 75 agencies to provide services to homeless people, said Katie Kitchin, director of Norfolk's Office to End Homelessness.

Norfolk has placed about 200 homeless people in apartments. There are programs for homeless families, people with HIV/AIDS and homeless ex-convicts.